



War in Afghanistan: Campaign Progress, Political Strategy, and Issues for Congress

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Summary

This is a critical time for U.S. efforts in the war in Afghanistan. In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama announced that the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan would draw down by an additional 34,000 troops, to about 33,000, by February 2014, and that by the end of 2014 “our war in Afghanistan will be over.” Further decision-making regarding the U.S. force presence in Afghanistan, including after the end of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission at the end of 2014, is expected later this year. Yet while troop levels tend to steal the headlines, far more fundamentally at stake is what it would take to ensure the long-term protection of U.S. interests in Afghanistan and the region.

Arguably, the United States may have a number of different interests at stake in the region: countering al Qaeda and other violent extremists; preventing nuclear proliferation; preventing nuclear confrontation between nuclear-armed states; standing up for American values, including basic human rights and the protection of women; and preserving the United States’ ability to exercise leadership on the world stage. At issue is the relative priority of these interests, what it would take in practice to ensure that they are protected, and their relative importance compared to other compelling security concerns around the globe.

U.S. efforts in Afghanistan include an array of activities: prosecuting the fight on the ground, in support of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), to counter the insurgency; supporting Afghanistan’s political process, including the presidential elections scheduled to be held in April 2014; providing assistance to help Afghans craft and grow a viable economy; and facilitating Afghan-led efforts to achieve a high-level political settlement with the Taliban. At issue is whether these are the activities best suited to achieve a lasting outcome that protects U.S. interests, as well as how some or all of these activities might most constructively inform each other.

As of mid-2013, most Afghan and ISAF commanders suggested that the campaign on the ground was gaining traction, reflected in the successful security transition to Afghan lead responsibility for security and in improvements in the ANSF; in the diminished strength of the insurgency; and in the successful adaptation by coalition forces to new roles and missions. Afghan and ISAF commanders also shared roughly the same vision of further steps, in which the roles played by the coalition would diminish in scale and grow more tailored in scope, with a particular focus on advising and enabling the ANSF.

Yet most observers agree that the long-term sustainability of campaign gains—and the protection of U.S. interests—would require major changes in the broader strategic landscape. Critical requirements would include sufficiently responsive Afghan governance; a viable economy that offers Afghans sufficient opportunities; a regional context that supports rather than undermines Afghan stability; and a conclusion to the war broadly acceptable to the Afghan people.

This report describes the current strategic context, the state of the campaign, next steps in the campaign, and what it would take to make campaign gains sustainable; and it offers questions that may be of help to Congress in providing oversight of further U.S. efforts in Afghanistan.

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Introduction

In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama stated that by February 2014, another 34,000 U.S. troops would come home from Afghanistan, and that by the end of 2014, “our war in Afghanistan will be over.”¹ While troop levels and drawdown curves tend to steal the headlines, more fundamental is the question of how coherently all the facets of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan fit together as part of a single political strategy aimed at bringing the war to an acceptable conclusion.

Recent months have witnessed a great deal of activity. Afghanistan’s security transition received a jumpstart on June 18, 2013, when the Afghan government and NATO announced Milestone 2013, a marker that recognized Afghan exercise of lead responsibility for security across all of Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s political transition, a continuation of the political process launched in Bonn twelve years ago, was further catalyzed in July 2013 when Afghan President Hamid Karzai signed two election laws recently passed by the Afghan parliament, refining the legal and oversight frameworks that will govern the presidential and provincial council elections scheduled for 2014, and the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2015. Afghanistan’s economic transition toward greater self-sufficiency received reinvigorated attention from the international donor community in July 2013, at the one-year anniversary of the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan. Regionally, renewed efforts in 2013 related to Afghan-Pakistani border security suggested the prospect, at least, of fruitful bilateral and regional collaboration. And reinvigorated reconciliation efforts, aimed at achieving a political settlement of the conflict, took center stage in June 2013 with the opening of a Taliban political office in Doha, Qatar, which coincided directly with the Milestone 2013 announcement.

Less immediately obvious, amidst all this vigorous activity, is what if anything these various threads add up to; and how if at all they might best reinforce each other to lay a foundation for future stability in Afghanistan. From a U.S. perspective, a central question concerns how the security gains of the campaign on the ground might best be leveraged to shape the political landscape and catalyze broader political progress, in order to protect U.S. interests over the long term, at an acceptable cost.

This report briefly summarizes the strategic context for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan; analyzes recent campaign progress, remaining campaign requirements, and steps that might be required to make those gains sustainable; and provides questions that may be of use to Congress in exercising oversight of the war in Afghanistan.²

¹ President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in the State of the Union Address,” Washington, DC, February 12, 2013, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address>. Most U.S. forces in Afghanistan serve in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, while some others, including some Special Operations Forces, serve under direct U.S. command. The U.S. four-star commander in Afghanistan has dual-hatted responsibility for U.S. efforts and the NATO mission. The war in Afghanistan began in late 2001 with a U.S.-led coalition military operation designed to remove Afghanistan’s Taliban-led regime and to prevent future terrorist safe havens, in the wake of the terrorist attacks launched by al Qaeda from Afghanistan on September 11, 2001.

² This report is based in part on the author’s extensive experience on the ground in Afghanistan with NATO ISAF including, most recently, two and a half months in spring/ summer 2013, for which opportunities the author remains grateful. For further analysis related to Afghanistan, see additional CRS reports by, or consult directly, Amy Belasco, Susan Chesser, Catherine Dale, Kenneth Katzman, Alan Kronstadt, Rhoda Margesson, Moshe Schwartz, Curt Tarnoff, (continued...)

Strategy

For the U.S. government, fundamental components of strategy for the war in Afghanistan include:

- U.S. national security interests in Afghanistan and the region;
- the minimum essential conditions—political, economic, security—that would need to pertain in Afghanistan and the region in order to protect U.S. interests over the long run;
- current and projected U.S. approaches, until and after 2014, for helping Afghans establish and sustain those conditions;
- the timeline by which, and extent to which, Afghans are likely to be able to sustain those conditions with relatively limited support from the international community;
- risks to U.S. national security interests if Afghans are unable to do so; and
- the importance of this overall effort—given its likely timeline, risks, and costs—compared to other U.S. priorities.

In practice, the Obama Administration has reasonably consistently articulated two core goals for the war—to defeat al-Qaeda and to prevent future safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan.³ Yet the Administration has made some refinements and changes in emphasis over time. In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama described the goal as “defeating the *core* of al Qaeda”, a new and narrower formulation.⁴ And between 2010 and 2011, in its “1230” reports to Congress, the Department of Defense (DOD) revised its description of the strategic architecture of goals, objectives and activities, subtly narrowing the scope of ambition.⁵

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and Liana Wyler.

³ See for example President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Washington, DC, March 27, 2009, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/; and President Barack Obama, Remarks by President Obama in Address to the Nation from Afghanistan, May 1, 2012.

⁴ Emphasis added. See President Obama, State of the Union, 2013.

⁵ DOD’s “1230” reports are based on P.L. 110-181, §1230 and 1231, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008, as amended. The two 1230 reports issued in 2010, in April and November, echoed the language that had emerged from the strategic review conducted by the Administration in late 2009 – that is, two core goals, defeating al Qaeda and preventing its return, together with a number of objectives to support the goals. The objectives included, among others, reversing the Taliban’s momentum and denying it the ability to overthrow the Afghan government; and strengthening the capacity of Afghanistan’s security forces and the Afghan government so that they could take responsibility for Afghanistan’s future. The 1230 report issued in April 2011, the first issued after the Afghanistan Pakistan Annual Review (APAR) conducted by the Administration in late 2010, retained most of the language from the 2009 review and the 1230 reports from 2010, but significantly altered the emphasis. The report identified a core goal: to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan and to prevent its capacity to threaten the United States and U.S. Allies in the future.” The status of “denying safe haven to al Qaeda” was shifted from a goal to a supporting objective. The objective concerning the Taliban was modified to remove reference to reversing the Taliban’s momentum, thus emphasizing the remaining half of the objective, preventing a Taliban overthrow of the government – a formulation that pointedly leaves open the prospect of arriving by peaceful means at a political power-sharing arrangement that includes the Taliban. In addition, in the April 2011 report, the 2010-era objective of strengthening Afghan security force and government capacity was downgraded to a passive opportunity – further degradation of the insurgency by U.S. and coalition forces would “create time and space for Afghan capacity to grow,” (continued...)

The basic framework for most recent U.S. government civilian and military efforts on the ground in Afghanistan dates back to 2009, when General Stanley McChrystal took command of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and was tasked to conduct an initial strategic assessment. That assessment, and the subsequent ISAF campaign design it informed, were based on the Administration's two core goals as well as on the novel prospect of more troops, more civilian expertise, more resources, more high-level leadership attention, and relatively unlimited time.⁶

Since then, at least six major constraints have been introduced:

- In December 2009, in a speech at West Point, President Obama announced that a troop surge would take place, but that those surge troops would begin to draw down in July 2011.
- In November 2010, at the NATO Lisbon Summit, the Afghan government and the NATO Allies, including the United States, agreed to pursue a formal process, called Transition, in which responsibility for security would shift over time to the Afghan Government. This process was to begin shortly thereafter—in early 2011—and to be completed by the end of 2014.
- In a June 2011 speech, President Obama announced parameters for drawing down U.S. surge forces. From the surge peak of about 100,000 U.S. troops, the U.S. troop commitment in Afghanistan would decrease by 10,000 troops by the end of 2011, and by a further 23,000 by the end of September 2012, declining to a total of 68,000 by that date. Afterwards, the pace of further drawdowns would be “steady” and at some point the mission would change “from combat to support.”
- In May 2012, at the NATO Chicago Summit, the Afghan government and NATO added a new step to the formal Transition process, Milestone 2013: Afghans would assume lead responsibility for security throughout Afghanistan by mid-2013, and at that point, international forces would shift to playing a primarily supporting role.
- In January 2013, during President Karzai's visit to Washington, DC, he and President Obama announced that Milestone 2013 would be reached earlier—in spring, not summer, 2013.
- And in February 2013, President Obama announced that the U.S. troop commitment in Afghanistan would draw down by 34,000 more troops by February 2014—leaving approximately 33,000 troops in Afghanistan—and that by the end of 2014, “our war in Afghanistan will be over.”⁷

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without committing the coalition to actively facilitating that growth. See Department of Defense, *Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, April 2010, November 2010, April 2011, and October 2011.

⁶ From an Afghan perspective, the experience of war and conflict is now decades-long, but concerted, coordinated efforts by the international community are arguably quite recent. See General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF's Initial Assessment, August 30, 2009, available in redacted form from the Washington Post, at http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf. The author was part of the McChrystal Assessment team.

⁷ See President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan (continued...)

At the same time, the timeline for the declared commitment of the international community to Afghanistan has been extended well past 2014. In November 2011, at the International Conference on Afghanistan held in Bonn, the international community pledged broad support until 2024, through the so-called Decade of Transformation following Transition. In May 2012, at the NATO Chicago Summit, participants affirmed that NATO's security partnership with Afghanistan would not end with the current campaign. The U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), signed in May 2012—a statement of mutual commitment in multiple arenas—is scheduled to remain in force until 2024. And President Obama, during his early 2013 press conference with President Karzai, iterated that U.S. forces would remain engaged in Afghanistan after 2014, in “two long-term tasks”—albeit “very specific and very narrow” ones—including “first, training and assisting Afghan forces and second, targeted counterterrorism missions against al Qaeda and its affiliates.”⁸

Questions that might help inform the debates about U.S. strategy for Afghanistan include:

- What interests does the U.S. government have at stake in Afghanistan and the region, and in what priority order? Where if at all on that list should the following concerns figure: countering al Qaeda and other violent extremist organizations; preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; preventing nuclear confrontation between nuclear-armed states; standing up for core U.S. values including human rights and the protection of women; preserving and strengthening U.S. ability to exercise leadership on the world stage?
- How appropriate are declared U.S. goals and objectives regarding Afghanistan for protecting U.S. interests?
- How consonant are the ways and means currently being employed with those declared goals and objectives?
- To what extent if any might longer-term U.S. and international commitments balance the risks associated with near-term disengagement?
- Given the full panoply of U.S. national security interests and broader concerns, what should be the relative priority of Afghanistan and its region, between now

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and Pakistan, West Point, NY, December 1, 2009, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>; NATO Lisbon Summit Declaration, Lisbon, Portugal, November 20, 2010, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm?mode=pressrelease; President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan, Washington, DC, June 22, 2011, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan>; Chicago Summit Declaration issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Chicago, May 20, 2012, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87593.htm?mode=pressrelease; Joint Press Conference by President Obama and President Karzai, Washington, DC, January 11, 2013, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/11/joint-press-conference-president-obama-and-president-karzai>; and President Obama, State of the Union, 2013.

⁸ See Afghanistan and the International Community: From Transition to the Transformation Decade, Conference Conclusions, the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, December 5, 2011; Chicago Summit Declaration; Joint Press Conference; and Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, May 2, 2012, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistanspassignedtext.pdf>.

and 2014, and after 2014, for the U.S. government? What would be an acceptable cost?

State of the Campaign

The basic premise of the campaign is to build up competent Afghan forces (ANSF), while reducing the scale of the insurgent threat to proportions that those Afghan forces can manage in the future with very limited support from the international community. By most Afghan and coalition accounts, the basic logic of the campaign has proven to be sound—based on the overall improvement of Afghan forces, degradation of the insurgency, and adaptation by coalition forces. Indeed, many observers contend that if the campaign were not working, it should be discontinued immediately—not gradually—given its high cost in terms of lives and resources.

Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)

The ANSF are not a monolith, but in general, both ANSF and coalition commanders describe marked positive changes over the calendar year to date.

By the end of 2012, most Afghan forces, and particularly the Afghan National Army (ANA), already had basic warfighting skills. What they displayed, by mid-2013, was growing confidence that manifested itself in initiative, planning, and execution. ANA Corps Commanders, for example, compellingly described coherent visions and specific plans for the counter-insurgency (COIN) campaigns that they were leading.⁹

That new confidence was, in part, the product of necessity. The drawdown of 33,000 U.S. troops in 2012, and the very visible base consolidations and closures that accompanied it, galvanized the conviction of Afghan security leaders at all levels that coalition forces were, indeed, going home, and led many to take on greater responsibility. Many ANSF commanders have described taking on missions they were initially not sure they could handle, then being convinced by their success to take on even more.¹⁰

In a further recent change, by mid-2013, not only were the ANSF initiating more operations, those operations were more likely to generate positive effects, as the ANSF increasingly applied lessons learned from previous operations. For example, over the winter from 2012 to 2013, the ANA 205th Corps conducted the Kalak Hode (“determined strike”) series of operations in Kandahar, Zabul, and Uruzgan provinces—combined arms efforts of unprecedented scale. One major lesson they learned was that sequential operations with long pauses for re-set gave the enemy a chance to re-group; so their follow-on Strong Border series of operations, in 2013, was designed to include a continuous cycle of planning and execution.¹¹

Many observers suggest that one important way to gauge ANSF progress is through their “resilience”—that is, their ability to recover in the face of setbacks. A loss of some kind, however

⁹ Interviews with 201st ANA Corps Commander Major General Waziri; 203rd ANA Corps Commander Major General Yaftali; 205th ANA Corps Commander Major General Hamid; and 215th ANA Corps Commander Major General Malouk, 2013.

¹⁰ Ibid., and interviews with other Afghan officials, 2012 and 2013.

¹¹ Interviews with ANSF and ISAF officials, 2013.

hard, it is argued, is not catastrophic as long as the ANSF do not lose confidence in their own ability, and Afghan people do not lose confidence in the ANSF. Anecdotal evidence during the 2013 fighting season suggests growing resilience. For example, in spring 2013, the 2nd Brigade of the 201st ANA Corps, based in Kunar province, had an observation post (OP) at a remote location overrun by insurgents, at the same time that it was conducting a deliberate operation in Marawara district. Though the losses at the OP were heavy, the ANSF were able to retake the OP, and reported reasonable confidence in their ability to continue to execute the campaign.¹²

Another recent development has been far greater integration of effort across the ANSF in planning and execution. Not long ago, it was not uncommon for the Afghan Army and police to get into firefights with each other. By mid-2013, combined Army/police planning and operating had become the norm. Many Afghan civilian and security officials have reported that weekly or bi-weekly provincial-level security *shuras*, which bring together, under the chairmanship of the Provincial Governor, the leaders of the various Afghan forces operating in a province, have significantly catalyzed unity of effort. As of mid-2013, some officials at the Ministry of Interior in Kabul continued to repeat the mantra that “it takes the Army three days to respond, when the police get in trouble”, but most accounts closer to the ground suggest a somewhat different picture, in which Afghan forces frequently come to the aid of other forces when they get in trouble, without waiting for a “cipher” (an order) from Kabul or a prod from coalition forces.¹³

In principle, unity of effort requires some shared understanding of the division of labor—and of resources—across Afghan forces. In practice, as of mid-2013, such “layered security”—the distribution of roles and responsibilities—looked different from place to place, depending in part on the security challenges and developmental state of each Afghan force, in each area. For example, as of mid-2013: the ANA were still struggling in many places to come off of check points (CPs), waiting for available and capable Afghan uniformed or local police (AUP, ALP) to take their places; the AUP and ALP were being employed interchangeably in many places, particularly at CPs along major routes, rather than reserving the ALP to fill their original mandate of thickening the lines in outlying areas; some of the Afghan Border Police (ABP) were hunkered down, doing little, beyond the operational reach of other Afghan forces and, in one province, apparently beyond the notice of the Provincial Governor; and the Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), though highly-trained, continued to frustrate other Afghan forces with their direct reporting chain back to Kabul and their short rotation cycles. In turn, by all accounts, including their own, “personalities”—whether the strong, nationally inclined Commanders of some ANA Corps, or cult-of-personality police chiefs such as Abdul Raziq in Kandahar, and Matiullah Khan in Uruzgan—appeared likely to continue to play an outsize role in the Afghan security arena for some time.¹⁴

Most observers suggest that ultimately, the ANSF will need a systematized division of labor, in order to size and resource the total force efficiently and effectively. Yet for now, many suggest, it may be sufficient that Afghan security leaders in any given place share a vision of what security should look like there, and of who should do what to provide it.

¹² Interview with the 2nd Brigade, 201st ANA Corps Commander, and other ANSF officials, 2013.

¹³ Interviews with ISAF and Afghan officials, 2013.

¹⁴ Interviews with ANSF officials, Afghan civilian officials, and ISAF officials, 2012 and 2013. One frustrated District Chief of Police, in Kandahar province, said, “Take my 900 ANCOP and just give 100 guys who are here all the time!”

In addition to capabilities, confidence, resilience, and unity of effort, sheer capacity also affects ANSF effectiveness. The current target endstrength for the ANSF, as agreed by the Afghan government and supported by the international community, is 352,000. Afghan and ISAF officials estimate that that target is not likely to be reached until 2017, given the projected development timeline for the Afghan Air Force. At the May 2012 NATO Chicago Summit, participants agreed that after the conclusion of the NATO ISAF mission at the end of 2014, the ANSF would begin a “gradual managed force reduction” to a “sustainable level” of 228,500. But after Afghan and NATO officials raised concerns about both the timing and drawdown slope of that plan, it is now expected that the ANSF target endstrength will remain at 352,000 for at least several years more.¹⁵

Insurgency

For many observers, the state of the insurgency is a critical factor in gauging campaign progress to date. Changes in the insurgency tend to be neither linear over time, nor evenly distributed geographically. Insurgent activity tends to follow a cyclical pattern: an annual fighting season, which runs roughly from the end of the poppy harvest in the spring until the weather turns cold in the fall, followed by a lull in activity during the winter typically used for rest and recuperation. Geographically, the insurgent threat has been concentrated, though not exclusively, in the largely Pashtun-populated eastern and southern areas of Afghanistan, which offer easy access across the border to safe havens in Pakistan. In turn, spurred by the 2009 McChrystal Assessment, the campaign adopted geographic priorities that focused in general on population centers and commerce routes, and specifically on the south, the Taliban’s traditional homeland.¹⁶

As of mid-2013, the insurgency was certainly not defeated—and it continued to enjoy the ability to recruit, as well as the luxury of safe havens in Pakistan. But by most accounts, including their own, insurgent networks had been degraded and their costs of doing business inside Afghanistan had risen substantially. For example, some insurgents had been forced to use longer and more treacherous transit routes, and it had grown more expensive to pay some lower-level fighters.¹⁷

Further, Afghan and coalition officials report that as security responsibility has shifted to Afghan forces, and as the coalition and other components of the international community visibly continue to reduce their efforts, the insurgency has increasingly targeted those Afghans who might pose the greatest existential threat to insurgent success: the ALP; the ground-up, local anti-Taliban movements born of frustration with Taliban intimidation; and Afghan civilian officials at the national, provincial, and local levels. To some extent, this shift of focus has rendered some insurgent political rhetoric less coherent, as the insurgency loses its ability to cast the international “occupiers” as the enemy and struggles to explain why it is killing fellow Afghans. By many accounts the insurgency as a whole is increasingly fractured—divided politically in its views regarding political settlement efforts, and divided operationally regarding targeting.¹⁸

¹⁵ See Chicago Summit Declaration, May 20, 2012. Interviews with Afghan and ISAF officials, 2013. See DOD, Security and Stability in Afghanistan, July 2013.

¹⁶ See McChrystal Assessment, 2009; and Interviews with ISAF officials, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013.

¹⁷ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2013.

¹⁸ For example, some insurgent leaders might view targeting international organizations as the priority because it might draw more support from the insurgency’s international “donors,” while other insurgent leaders might view targeting local Afghan security forces as the priority because such forces most directly challenge the insurgency’s influence and ability to operate. Interviews with ISAF and Afghan officials, 2013.

Coalition Forces

As the U.S. government, NATO, and the Afghan government consider the possibility of a post-2014 coalition force presence in Afghanistan, most observers agree that a prerequisite for any such presence is the ability of coalition forces to adapt to the advisory and enabling roles they would be required to play. In theory, if effective adaptability is beyond the coalition's ability, then further presence should not be considered.

In practice, the trajectory of adaptation, while uneven, has been rapid and, by many accounts, effective. Just a few years ago, coalition forces fought largely unilaterally, pulling along with them handfuls of Afghan forces when available. In 2009, the McChrystal Assessment called for full, *shona ba shona* ("shoulder to shoulder") unit-partnering—coalition and Afghan units living, planning, and executing together, 24/7—and the troop density provided by the coalition troop surge made it possible to partner on a large scale. But partnering was never an end in itself, and when Afghan capabilities permitted, coalition forces generally began stepping back and shifting into unequal partnerships in which Afghan forces increasingly played leading roles. For at least the last year, coalition forces have been refocusing on tailored advisory and enabling activities and re-organizing accordingly.¹⁹ As of mid-2013, coalition commanders at all levels were conducting a robust internal debate about the effects that they still needed to generate, largely indirectly; and the circumstances under which they should step back into the fight, or step back further from it.

Some observers point out that adaptation has been born of necessity, catalyzed by troop drawdowns and associated base consolidations and closures—in particular the "surge recovery" of U.S. troops in 2012—which made it impossible to continue doing business in the same way. In 2013, many ISAF commanders point out that the pace of change seems to be faster than ever before—they no longer have the luxury of arriving in theater, assessing for 30 days, making decisions, and then executing. Instead, they must make continual significant adjustments to their force posture, priorities and approaches.²⁰

Questions that might help inform the debates about the current state of the campaign include:

- What are the most helpful ways to gauge campaign progress, and in particular, to evaluate qualitative arenas including ANSF confidence, resilience, and unity of effort?
- What are the most helpful ways to evaluate the strength of the insurgency? In particular, what does one learn from considering numbers of insurgent attacks, the sophistication and scale of attacks, the insurgency's stated intent, the kinds of targets the insurgency is choosing, and/or fracturing within the insurgent ranks?

¹⁹ Interviews with ISAF and Afghan officials, 2009 - 2013. While sourcing, organization, and employment for the advisory/ enabling mission have varied by troop contributing nation and Military Service, one basic element is the use of small teams that embed with much larger Afghan units or HQs, or regularly visit them, to provide some combination of advisory support, oversight, and access to enablers. The U.S. Army, for its part, introduced Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs) – streamlined, smaller brigades that typically use their own organic troops, from the brigade HQ and subordinate units, to form advisory teams. The SFAB's smaller size precludes, by definition, "doing it themselves." And the use of organic teams, many have suggested, has allowed clearer command and control, compared to the use of a brigade combat teams (BCT) supported by advisory teams sourced either by individual augmentees or from a different brigade.

²⁰ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2013.

- What are the most helpful ways to gauge the effectiveness of coalition forces, particularly when most of the effects the coalition seeks to generate are indirect?

Next Steps in the Campaign

As of mid-2013, most ISAF and Afghan commanders envisaged a further trajectory for the campaign in which coalition forces would continue to play supporting roles beyond the end of the NATO ISAF mission, but those roles would be ever more tailored in scope and smaller in scale. At the same time, debates continued among the Afghan Government, the U.S. government, and NATO, about possible parameters for a U.S. “enduring presence” after 2014, and a follow-on, post-2014 NATO Resolute Support Mission that would succeed ISAF.²¹ While both the internal debates and the broader public discussions about them tend to fixate on a single number of troops, more fundamentally at stake is the purpose of any post-2014 presence, including missions, authorities, and duration. In a word, what more would need to be done? Two broad roles—enabling and advising—are frequently mentioned as components of any post-2014 coalition engagement.

Enabling

“Enabling” efforts by coalition forces generally refer to helping the ANSF integrate, and rely on in practice, their own organic enablers. Most observers agree that Afghan forces will do things differently, and with different tools, than coalition forces have done, and Afghan forces may simply decide not to do some things altogether. Enabling is distinctly an art not a science—its core challenge is ensuring that a viable “bridge” is in place, between reliance on coalition and Afghan enablers, strong and sturdy enough to maintain Afghan confidence.

In the intelligence arena, for example, conventional wisdom suggests that Afghan forces will not enjoy the scope and scale of signals intelligence (SIGINT) that they have seen coalition forces employ, but Afghan forces will have access to much more finely-tuned human intelligence (HUMINT) due to their far closer cultural ties with local populations. While the ANSF may not be able to pinpoint insurgent presence in a particular compound, the thinking goes, they should be able to identify the relevant village, and then use door-to-door techniques to narrow their search.

But the coalition faces hurdles in enabling ANSF intelligence. One hurdle is cultural—encouraging the ANSF to conduct genuinely intel-driven operations, that is, basing their operations squarely on the understandings provided by intelligence, rather than simply “leaping in the back of a pick-up truck and going off to fight.” Another hurdle is determining when, if ever, during the ANSF’s transition to reliance on Afghan sources, the coalition should still provide information to the ANSF based on its own assets. For example, in spring 2013, the ANSF in Uruzgan had general information about a threat, but the coalition, from its own assets, received specific information about an imminent attack against the ANSF; the coalition chose to provide the information in an appropriate form because, according to one ISAF official, “to do otherwise would have been unethical.”²²

²¹ The Afghan government has made clear that it must formally give permission for any coalition force presence after 2014 – a U.S.-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) and a NATO-Afghan status of forces agreement (SOFA).

²² Interviews with ISAF and Afghan officials, 2013.

Most practitioners and observers cite “air” among the toughest challenges to ANSF reliance on their own organic enablers. The Afghan Air Force (AAF) is not expected to be fully fielded and mission capable for several more years, and even when it is, both its capacity and its capabilities will be relatively limited. For example, in the enabler arena of fires—the use of weapons and other systems to create a specific lethal or nonlethal effect on a target²³—the ANSF have relied significantly on coalition close air support (CAS), both rotary and fixed-wing, and are eager to have their own CAS capability. A more realistic solution to the ANSF need to be able to deliver fires, most agree, is a combination of some CAS and the use of ground-based systems. By mid-2013, Afghan and ISAF commanders reported, the ANA in some areas had made significant progress integrating D-30 Howitzers and mortars.²⁴

The enabler arena of casualty evacuation (CASEVAC)—critical for saving lives, and also, over the longer term, for protecting recruitment and preventing attrition—was the top concern for a number of ANA Corps Commanders during the first half of 2013. The development timeline and capacity limitations of the Afghan Air Force make the prospect of a CASEVAC system that relies wholly on air assets unrealistic. Conventional wisdom suggests that in the future, the ANSF will conduct CASEVAC using some combination of air and ground. Yet even that more balanced approach would still require a fairly complex system, including functioning ground and air transportation; finely honed point-of-injury skills; and available trauma care, whether military or civilian. Building such a system is plausible, many agree, but will take some time.²⁵

Advising

As Afghan forces increasingly played lead roles, and coalition forces scaled back their activities, a popular rhetoric emerged among coalition forces of “less is more”—that is, of letting Afghan forces try first, and even fail at times. That message, many considered, merited underscoring—it can be hard, it was argued, for hard-charging U.S. commanders on the ground to step back, “lead” from behind, and let host nation forces solve problems on their own timetable. One unintended result of the “less is more” message was that the concept of “advising” became conflated with the idea of simply “doing less.”²⁶

In practice on the ground—and increasingly in coalition theory as well—advising can refer to a number of different, complementary activities. These include:

²³ Joint Publication 3-0, Joint Operations, August 11, 2011, p. xiv, available at http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_0.pdf.

²⁴ Interviews with ISAF and ANSF officials, 2013.

²⁵ Interviews with Afghan and ISAF officials, 2013. In mid-2013, Afghan and ISAF officials illustrated the challenges of building enabler bridges with a cautionary tale from Jagatu, Wardak province. There, some Afghan police took enemy fire, and one was wounded. The police reached up their own chain of command to make a request to the Ministry of Defense (MoD), for rotary wing CASEVAC support. The MoD was unable to provide assets right away, and as the day progressed, it ran into the obstacle that Afghan Mi-17s do not fly at night. Meanwhile, a request for support was passed to ISAF. But ISAF had no forces anywhere nearby on the ground, and could not send helicopters into the apparent middle of nowhere; so ISAF declined to support. The wounded Afghan police officer bled out and died. Some of the Afghan police were reportedly furious ... not with ISAF, but with their own system. The story highlights the need for realistic but sufficient bridges from coalition to Afghan enablers that protect the Afghan force and help it maintain its confidence.

²⁶ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2012 and 2013.

- fostering more effective ANSF leadership through mentoring relationships at the appropriate levels;
- helping the ANSF build effective staffs—that is, creating not only effective individual staff sections, such as intelligence, planning, or public affairs, but also the ability to work together effectively;
- fostering Afghan unity of effort—as an objective in its own right, not an afterthought—particularly at the provincial level; and
- providing tailored ministerial support, including both technical assistance and appropriately senior-level managerial mentorship, in order to help Afghans build prioritized, basic systems. Such systems might include planning; resourcing against plans; personnel systems that reward merit in promotions and assignments, select out incompetence, and support operational cycles that help protect against attrition; and logistics systems that properly anticipate future needs and avoid hedging against future uncertainty. Such work requires patience and the recognition that systems cannot simply be built overnight.²⁷

Questions that might help inform the debates about next steps in the campaign include:

- Just how good do the ANSF need to be to contend effectively with anticipated residual insurgent threats and to sufficiently protect the Afghan people? What total ANSF endstrength, and what force mix, would that require over time?
- What would be the minimally sufficient mix of enablers that would allow the ANSF to protect the Afghan people? In order to ensure that Afghan confidence does not suffer significantly, as the ANSF work to integrate and rely on their own organic enablers, which enablers should be prioritized? And what direct enabler support, if any, and for how long, should the coalition be prepared to provide?
- To what extent if any might the ANSF assume some greater risk, functionally or geographically? That is, are there some things that the ANSF is currently planning to be able to do, that may not be utterly necessary? Are there some areas of Afghanistan in which it might be acceptable for ANSF coverage to be thinner, or even non-existent?
- How sharply defined must the division of labor among Afghan forces be, and by when will it be necessary to achieve such clarity? In particular, what should be the role of the Afghan Local Police—initially designed to be a community-based force to “thicken the lines” in outlying areas, but increasingly focused, like all the other ANSF, on the campaign priorities of population centers and commerce routes—in that mix?
- How important is it to provide as much clarity as possible about the scope, scale, and duration of future U.S. commitment of all kinds, in order to bolster the confidence of, and discourage hedging by, the ANSF, the Afghan leadership and

²⁷ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2013. Most observers regard the trajectory of coalition support to ministries as lagging behind the trajectory of coalition support to ANSF unit on the ground. Coalition countries, spurred in part by the perceived absolute need to keep very basic systems running, for years placed hundreds of personnel at a time in the Afghan security ministries, often effectively performing Afghan ministerial jobs. That orientation persisted well after coalition forces, at the tactical level, had begun to shift toward more indirect, supporting roles.

the Afghan people; to send a clear signal of resolve to the insurgency; and to catalyze commitments from other coalition partners? To what extent if any might clear signals of commitment help assuage pervasive Afghan fears of abandonment?

- What is the most appropriate way to project future requirements for U.S. and other coalition advisory and enabling support to the ANSF, including how those requirements might change in quantity and quality over time, given the non-linearity of ANSF development and the unknown future disposition of the insurgency? What might be the risks of getting it wrong? What would be the best way to ensure that a serious troop-to-task analysis is factored into the debates regarding a potential post-2014 U.S. and coalition force presence in Afghanistan?
- Concerning future counter-terrorism (CT) requirements, from a U.S. perspective, to what extent should the primary impetus be to retain the ability to take out targets directly, if needed? To what extent should it be, instead, to make sure that high-end Afghan forces have CT capabilities sufficient to keep such threats in check?
- In addition to enabling and advising, and CT, what other purposes might a post-2014 U.S. force presence in Afghanistan need to serve, toward meeting core U.S. goals—for example, serving as a deterrent to those who would challenge Afghanistan’s sovereignty, or providing leverage for U.S. supporting efforts to Afghanistan’s political process?
- What is the most helpful way to think about the relationship between further coalition troop drawdowns and Afghan confidence? Under what conditions if any might Afghan forces simply choose not to undertake a mission from fear of failure; or to cede territory altogether as too difficult to control; or to make local-level accommodations with insurgent forces in areas they do not feel confident they can control? Under what conditions if any might the ANSF—together differently—undertake too-ambitious operations in which they not merely fail, but fail so catastrophically that it destroys their confidence in their own abilities, or the confidence of the Afghan people in the ability of the ANSF to protect them? When if at all might the coalition be in danger of staying too long?
- To what extent might the requirements of retrograde—ensuring the safe return home of the troops, and the appropriate and responsible disposition of materiel—be expected to impinge on the time and attention of leaders and troops still needed for the campaign? Practitioners and observers point out that retrograde from Afghanistan may prove far more complicated than from Iraq, given Afghanistan’s difficult terrain; its relative dearth of transportation infrastructure; and the lack of a “Kuwait” next door, to pause in, on the way home.²⁸

Making Campaign Gains Sustainable

Most observers agree that while campaign progress may deliver security gains, the longer-term sustainability of those gains will depend on key facets of the broader strategic landscape,

²⁸ Interviews with ISAF and DOD officials, 2012 and 2013.

including governance, economics, Pakistan and the region, and whether and how the war is brought to a close. At issue is what it would take in each of these areas, at a minimum, to protect security gains and make them sustainable.

Governance

Many Afghans and outside observers suggest that sustainability requires an architecture of responsive governance to direct the ANSF and hold them accountable; to provide access to justice and the rule of law; to ensure some minimum foundation of economic viability and opportunity; to inspire the trust of regional neighbors; and to earn at least the tacit confidence of the Afghan people. Yet today, the practice of governance in Afghanistan is more accurately characterized as personalized rule: not everyone loses, and indeed many benefit, but the exercise of governance, in general, is neither predictable nor based on the rule of law.

One fundamental challenge to the practice of responsible governance in Afghanistan is simply capacity. Afghan officials and international practitioners generally agree that Afghanistan's highly centralized system of budgeting, decision-making and distribution functions in fits and starts. In practice, some of Afghanistan's 34 provinces have become expert in shaking resources loose from Kabul—through what amounts to effective lobbying with Kabul-based ministries.²⁹

But in many other cases, including some that might be considered urgent, the system is less responsive. Panjwayi district of Kandahar province provides a striking example. Panjwayi, a key approach to Kandahar city—a focal point of the campaign—was long an insurgent sanctuary. In early 2013, elders in Zangabad, Panjwayi—emboldened in part by the appointment of a new District Chief of Police (DCoP) originally from their own area, whom they trusted enough to ask for help—decided to stand up to persistent Taliban intimidation. The DCoP helped rally a broader ANSF response, including the establishment of many more Afghan local police. In the wake of the uprising, Kandahar Provincial Governor Toryalai Wesa visited Panjwayi, called for greater access to schools and clinics to help solidify the security gains, and pledged to seek support from the relevant ministries in Kabul. While Kandaharis themselves were able to build or repair a number of schools and clinics, Kabul was slow to provide operations and maintenance funds, or personnel to staff the facilities. So as part of the solution, ANA soldiers were assigned to teach school in Panjwayi—a creative solution but not a sustainable one.³⁰

Another even more pernicious challenge to responsive governance is corruption, not only in the sense of individual rent-seeking behaviors, but more broadly in the sense of the pervasive, voracious contestation for political and economic power and influence, which consistently cannibalizes the formal Afghan state. Major players within the formal system—from Provincial Governors including Gul Agha Sherzai of Nangarhar and Atta Mohammad Noor of Balkh, to Police Chiefs Matiullah Khan of Uruzgan and Abdul Raziq of Kandahar—draw on that system to distribute patronage.

As of mid-2013, perhaps nowhere was the contestation for power and influence more visible than it was in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. The area featured multiple tribes striving for

²⁹ Interviews with Afghan and U.S. officials, 2012 and 2013.

³⁰ As one ISAF official quipped, "Good thing we taught 'em how to read!" Interviews with Afghan civilian, ANSF, and ISAF officials, 2013.

ascendancy, untold potential poppy profits at stake, the deeply vested interests of the Akundzada family with its close ties to the Presidential Palace in Kabul, the use of district-level governorships and police chief posts as pawns in the power struggle at the expense of local order, a Taliban all too eager to take advantage of any local-level political vacuums, and a relatively new Helmand Provincial Governor eager to broker a big-tent solution in northern Helmand if only President Karzai would give him significantly expanded gubernatorial authorities. As one ISAF commander observed, “It’s Helmand—it will always be corrupt!”³¹

The international community has struggled for years with the tension between Afghanistan’s need for some reasonable foundation of governance, and the inherent challenges of supporting the construction of such a foundation from the outside. One of the main conclusions of the 2009 McChrystal Assessment was that governance needed to be on par with security as a focus of the campaign, in order for the campaign to succeed. The basic theory was that the primary arbiter of lasting stability in Afghanistan is the Afghan people—the extent to which they accept the system and are able to hold it accountable. But subsequent efforts by the international community were distinctly uneven in both intent and effects. They included attempts to define the minimal governance requirements at the district level by focusing on the *tashkil* (personnel roster); to create positive and negative incentive structures to shape the activities of key powerbrokers; to build capacity in key ministries, all too often by doing the work directly; and to nudge the Afghan system into replacing local officials deemed by local residents to be truly up to no good.³²

Meanwhile, many Afghan thought leaders have pointed to a potentially powerful remedy to help correct perceived power imbalances and the lack of accountability—the growing, and increasingly organized and powerful, voices of Afghan civil society organizations, women’s groups, media outlets, private sector pioneers, religious authorities, and traditional local councils. Many Afghans suggest that these voices have great potential to help hold governance in check—if they are given time to develop. And while some support from the international community would be welcome, they say—including technical and advisory support, and continued guarantees of basic security—it is Afghans who would do, indeed are doing, the lion’s share of the work.³³

Many observers suggest that the Afghan presidential elections scheduled to be held in April 2014 offer an opportunity to catalyze constructive changes in Afghan governance.³⁴ Some frame the elections as not merely an opportunity but also a concern, arguing that egregious perceived failure in either the process or the outcome could sharply derail Afghan confidence in the future and exacerbate widespread hedging behaviors. Others caution that the elections ought not to be regarded as a panacea, stressing that Afghanistan’s capacity and corruption challenges cannot be solved overnight, and encouraging a view of the elections as a catalyst of a longer-term, constitutionally-based political process.

U.S. policy was arguably slow to recognize the criticality, in the eyes of many Afghans, of the 2014 elections, but that perception has notably shifted. At a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing in July 2013, for example, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Ambassador James Dobbins argued: “... we must be clear that our main priority for the coming

³¹ Interviews with Afghan and ISAF officials, 2013.

³² See McChrystal Assessment, 2009; and Interviews with ISAF officials, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013.

³³ Interviews with Afghan thought leaders, 2012 and 2013.

³⁴ The presidential elections are mandated by the Afghan Constitution. The Constitution provides that a President may serve only two terms, rendering President Karzai ineligible to contest the elections.

year is neither the military transition, nor the reconciliation process, but rather the political transition that will occur when Afghan people choose a new president and a new president takes office next year.”³⁵

Questions that might help inform the debates about Afghan governance include:

- How “good” does good Afghan governance need to be? What would be sufficient in the eyes of Afghans?
- How do Afghans envisage “accountability” and the mechanisms necessary to make it work? What might the U.S. government do to support their vision?
- What kind of durable stability can be achieved in a system based in part on self-interested powerbrokers largely unconstrained by accountability mechanisms? What impact might relatively unchecked corruption have in the longer-run on security and economic development?
- How might the international community most effectively speak with one voice to leverage the potential opportunities of the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework—a pointed set of commitments, part of the Tokyo Declaration, aimed in part at countering corruption?
- How critical are the 2014 Afghan presidential elections to the future development of Afghan governance? At a minimum, how good do the process and the outcome need to be, so that the Afghan people maintain basic confidence in the system, or at a bare minimum do not reject that system outright?
- What forms of support to the Afghan electoral process might it be appropriate for the U.S. and other international partners to provide, such as helping ensure safe and secure conditions throughout the campaigning and election seasons; offering technical support to help ensure accountable, functioning electoral mechanisms; urging that the elections be conducted in accordance with the Afghan Constitution; and/or encouraging broadly participatory elections?
- From a U.S. perspective, how might the democratic advantages of a broadly participatory process with many candidates best be reconciled with the potential advantages in terms of stability of the emergence of a consensus candidate?
- What opportunities might there be, post-election, for the international community to work with Afghanistan’s new leadership, which may also include new ministerial and gubernatorial appointees—and which might, in the wake of the elections, be more accountable to the Afghan people—to support the further development of a Constitutionally-based Afghan political process?
- To what extent do alternative voices in Afghanistan—including civil society, the private sector, the media, and traditional local authority structures—have the potential to contribute to a system of checks and balances by which the Afghan people can hold government accountable? In particular, how important is the protection of women to that emerging system? To what extent if any, and in what

³⁵ See Ambassador James Dobbins, Senate Foreign Relations Committee full hearing “Transition in Afghanistan,” July 11 2013, transcript.

ways, might the international community support the further development of such voices?

Economics

Afghanistan's future economic viability is critical for ensuring that security gains are sustainable over the longer-term. In principle, Afghanistan's natural resources, agricultural potential, and human capital could form the basis for a viable future economy. But Afghanistan is on an ambitious timeline, trying to achieve significant economic self-sufficiency by 2024—first of all by improving its ability to generate, collect, and spend revenues—and by any measure that will be a stretch.³⁶

Efforts by the international community to help Afghans foster a working economy have been decidedly mixed. Years of relatively indiscriminate spending by the international community led to an array of unproductive or counterproductive results, including an inability to track money spent; the flow of assistance funds out of the country; the distortion of labor markets; investment in systems or components that Afghans did not want or could not sustain; and the empowerment of “thugs.”³⁷

Recent years have witnessed somewhat stronger collaboration both between the international community and the Afghan Government, and within the international community, aimed at crafting and pursuing a single approach toward further economic development. The so-called Kabul process encouraged a shared focus on prioritized Afghan systems including infrastructure, transportation, financial mechanisms, the judicial sector, and human capital. At the July 2012 Tokyo Conference, participants pledged support through the Decade of Transformation and affirmed their commitment to the Kabul Process principles.³⁸ Meanwhile, a corresponding paradigm shift among practitioners on the ground echoed the same theme of “making Afghan systems work.” That shift, many noted, was driven in part by necessity, as international assistance funding diminished and—more strikingly—international civilian presence on the ground was curtailed.³⁹

Questions that might help inform the debates about Afghanistan's economy include:

- While commitments from the U.S. government and NATO have extended the timeline of “commitment” out to 2024, will this provide sufficient time for Afghans to build a largely self-sustaining economy?

³⁶ For solar year (SY) 1392, the Afghan government expects to collect approximately \$2.5 billion in domestic revenues. Afghanistan's budget for SY 1392 is \$6.8 billion, which includes some international support, in addition to domestic revenues. The budget does not reflect substantial off-budget assistance from international grants and loans. See Ministry of Finance, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 1392 National Budget, available at <http://mof.gov.af/en/documents>.

³⁷ Interviews with ISAF, U.S., and coalition officials, and Afghan thought leaders, 2009 - 2013.

³⁸ Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Towards a Self-Sustaining Afghanistan: An Economic Transition Strategy*, November 29, 2011; *Afghanistan and the International Community: From Transition to the Transformation Decade*, Conference Conclusions, the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, December 5, 2011; and *Tokyo Declaration: Partnership for Self-Reliance in Afghanistan, from Transition to Transformation*, from the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan, July 8, 2012.

³⁹ Interviews with U.S., Afghan, and other international officials, 2011 - 2013.

- What legal constructs and accountability mechanisms would have to be in place and what other minimum conditions met, in order for Afghanistan to maximize the potential of its mineral resources and potential agricultural productivity?
- Given that most observers agree that it will take time for Afghans to develop the ability to generate, collect, and spend revenues, and that international assistance is likely to diminish significantly in the near term, what are the risks to Afghan stability in the near term? To what extent and in what ways might the international community help mitigate any such risks?
- How might the real, palpable prospect of economic viability boost prospects for progress in other critical arenas—security transition and the political process? What impact, in turn, might the absence of a plausible economic future have on those arenas?
- Professions of commitment notwithstanding, how much assistance are members of the international community likely to provide to Afghanistan through 2024, given the significant financial pressures and competing demands that they are likely to face at home?

Pakistan and the Region

Most observers agree that it is hard to imagine a stable Afghanistan in isolation.

The country most intimately intertwined with Afghanistan's future is Pakistan. The relationship is necessarily an intimate one—the international border between them—the British-drawn Durand Line—cuts through territory inhabited, on both sides, by sizable ethnic Pashtun populations. Yet the relationship is also fraught—Afghan insurgents have long taken advantage of the largely porous border to enjoy safe haven and other forms of support inside Pakistan; and Afghanistan has frequently served as an arena for proxy contestation between the nuclear-armed states of Pakistan and India.

Many practitioners point to great potential for a mutually beneficial Afghan-Pakistani future strategic partnership, based on mutual recognition of sovereignty and shared interests in economic opportunity and security. Yet to date, observers note, a fundamental lack of good faith persists. That gap at the strategic level, many point out, increases the volatility of tactical-level border disputes; frustrates efforts to reduce or eliminate safe havens that directly support insurgent activities in Afghanistan; and complicates Pakistan's involvement in efforts to broker a political settlement in Afghanistan.

U.S. government policy has long recognized the central importance of Pakistan to Afghanistan's future, but has struggled to formulate an effective, strategically-grounded approach for shaping regional dynamics. One major premise of the 2009 McChrystal Assessment was that Pakistan would need to take some action to help curb the use of safe havens in Pakistan by Afghan insurgents, in order for the campaign to succeed. Based on that premise—and with greater force density and a more robust command architecture—ISAF intensified its efforts to foster trilateral (Afghan-Pakistani-ISAF) mil-to-mil contacts at the tactical level, including border coordination meetings, and at the operational level, including planning conferences.⁴⁰ Those outreach efforts

⁴⁰ One aim of those conferences, only very partially realized, was the conduct of “complementary” operations (continued...)

experienced major setbacks in the wake of the May 2011 U.S. operation that targeted Osama bin Laden, and the November 2011 border incident at Salala, Pakistan, in which a number of Pakistani soldiers were killed or wounded. In 2013, ISAF significantly enhanced its focus on fostering Afghan-Pakistani bilateral engagement, yet both tactical-level challenges such as cross-border fires, and strategic-level challenges including a fundamental lack of good faith, persisted.⁴¹

The Afghan-Pakistani bilateral relationship is part of a much broader regional fabric, encompassing not only immediate neighbors including Iran and some Central Asian states, but also major players including China, India and Russia. Most observers suggest that durable stability in Afghanistan will depend in part on broader regional dynamics.

Questions that might help inform the debates about Pakistan and the region include:

- What impact if any would closer Afghan-Pakistani mil-to-mil ties be likely to have on the broader, civilian-led, Afghan-Pakistani strategic partnership? What implications might that hold for U.S. engagement?
- What opportunities might there be to leverage the security and economic interests of major regional players such as China in support of bringing the war in Afghanistan to an end and providing an enduring foundation for stability?
- What impact if any would stability in Afghanistan—or its absence—be likely to have on other key U.S. national security concerns in the region including potential future proliferation in Pakistan, or a possible Pakistani-Indian nuclear confrontation?
- How robustly developed is U.S. strategic thinking about the South Asian region? Might it be useful to take a renewed hard look at U.S. national security interests in the region; at the enduring interests of all major regional stakeholders; at an appropriate future vision for the region; and at the combination of tools of national power that might be applied over time to most effectively help realize that vision?

How Does This End?

Most agree that the war in Afghanistan, with all its related challenges and underlying causes, is unlikely to end a decisive victory on the battlefield. But broad disagreement persists regarding how the conflict might be resolved in a way that lays a lasting foundation of stability in Afghanistan and—from a U.S. perspective—protects U.S. interests over the long-term.

A prominent current approach to war termination, the Doha process, is based on a rather narrow concept of “reconciliation”—a high-level, top-down deal between the Afghan leadership and the Taliban, against a relatively short timeline. As most frequently described, those efforts seek to

(...continued)

conducted simultaneously on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border, designed to leave insurgents nowhere to seek sanctuary.

⁴¹ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2009 – 2013. See Investigation into the Incident in Vicinity of the Salala Checkpoint on the Night of 25-26 Nov 2011, redacted, a report by Brigadier General Stephen A. Clark, U.S. Central Command, December 26, 2011, available at <http://www.centcom.mil/images/stories/Crossborder/report%20exsum%20further%20redacted.pdf>.

identify common ground between the primary belligerents, and to use discrete confidence-building measures, in specific functional or geographic areas, as steps toward a formal agreement. The June 18, 2013, opening of the Taliban political office in Doha, Qatar, was a major event in this process—though by many accounts it went terribly awry, infuriating many Afghans, when the Taliban insisted on portraying the office as the political representation of the Afghan people and themselves as representatives of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the country’s formal name under Taliban rule.⁴²

U.S. policy broadly supports this approach to reconciliation, framing it as “Afghans talking to Afghans.” U.S. officials have articulated three U.S. “red lines” for the outcome of any such process—that insurgents renounce violence, renounce al Qaeda, and accept the Afghan Constitution.⁴³

Meanwhile, a number of Afghans have suggested that any such deal—between the current government, which they do not trust, and the Taliban leadership, which they fear—would hardly be likely to provide most Afghans with an inspiring shared vision of the future. Consequently, some Afghans and a number of outside observers have suggested that a more fruitful approach might be to recast war termination as a longer-term political settlement process, one that brings to bear the full participation of the Afghan people. In such a process, based on an inclusive national dialogue among all key sectors of society, Afghans might agree amongst themselves on a shared future vision of Afghanistan—one that includes former Northern Alliance members and southern Pashtuns, urban and rural populations, tribal elders and members of Afghanistan’s burgeoning youth population. That national dialogue, many Afghans stress, is already underway.⁴⁴ A longer timeline might help dispel the apparent sense of urgency that leads insurgent leaders to up their “asks” and prompts the Afghan leadership to seriously consider potentially detrimental compromises. And a plausible future vision—even though not yet realized—might help dispel the grim uncertainty that prompts so many Afghans to hedge, for example by seeking support from patronage networks, or exploring emigration opportunities, or acquiescing in local-level accommodations with insurgents.⁴⁵

Most broadly, many practitioners and observers point to the absence of a robust strategic logic linking together the roles of the Doha process, the campaign on the ground, the elections and broader political process, economic development, and regional dynamics, into a single overall approach.

Questions that might help inform the debates about how the war ends include:

- What strategic logic, if any, links, over time, the campaign on the ground, Afghanistan’s political process including the upcoming elections, further economic development, regional dynamics, and some form of reconciliation with

⁴² Many suggest that the Doha office opening went awry in another sense, by effectively trumping and overshadowing the announcement and celebration of Milestone 2013 that took place on the same day.

⁴³ U.S. policy initially framed these red lines as conditions that must be met before the Taliban began to participate in any negotiations process. Interviews with U.S. officials, 2011 - 2013.

⁴⁴ Presidential Advisor Dr. Ashraf Ghani has long been a leading advocate for fostering a robust national dialogue. He practices what he preaches, traveling widely across Afghanistan. He pointedly observes that a vibrant dialogue is indeed underway, even though most of the international community fails to recognize it because most of them don’t speak Dari.

⁴⁵ Interviews with Afghan thought leaders, 2012 and 2013.

the Taliban? How might these elements best inform each other over? Which of the elements would actually be required, and which might be optional, in order to ensure some foundation of stability in Afghanistan and to protect U.S. interests over the longer term?

- How necessary, if at all, is the achievement of a formal political agreement among former belligerents, to Afghanistan's stable future? Is it essential, and if so, does the timing matter? Is it, instead, a potentially helpful catalyst for Afghanistan's further political development, but not essential to it?
- Alternatively, to what extent if any might the pursuit of a formal political agreement between former belligerents have negative repercussions in other arenas, for example security, emerging national dialogue, political participation, or economic investment? How should these potential costs and benefits be balanced?

A Final Word

Looking ahead, some suggest that it is much easier, and in many ways more reassuring, to picture Afghanistan two years out than to try to visualize it five years out. Two years out, it is not hard to imagine, an Afghanistan—though still beset with great challenges—that enjoys an ever more competent ANSF, ever more reliant on its own enablers; better security in population centers and along commerce routes; and a new political leadership enjoying some sort of a honeymoon period. That vision, many would agree, is at the very least plausible.

Five years out, the picture seems much more difficult to predict. The image easiest to visualize may be that of Afghanistan as a palimpsest of overlapping, often competing, and sometimes mutually contradictory dynamics: self-regulating, roughly inclusive traditional forms of organization and dispute resolution at the local level; a highly centralized governance architecture based on the Bonn process that still struggles with insufficient capacity; a highly articulated system of informal power and influence networks, reaching inside and outside government, making decisions and distributing resources; some emerging institutions, particularly the Army, with truly national equities, impatient with others who do not share the same values; some limited economic opportunity, tempered by hedging behaviors driven by lingering uncertainty about the future; and some increasingly organized popular voices including those of the media and civil society writ large; together with some measure of continued though deeply diminished international support, and a whole array of deepening, sometimes-constructive and sometimes-adversarial, relationships with neighboring states. Further, it is not hard to imagine such a palimpsest either as a foundation for nascent stability, or as a set of precursors for civil war.

It seems reasonable to suggest that choices made in the near term, by the U.S., by the rest of the international community, and most of all by Afghans, will powerfully shape the interplay of all the major Afghan stakeholders a little further down the road.

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